Rush to the Klondike '98

On these programs it has been my custom to give as many first hand accounts of happening, or events connected with the West as I can. The only man qualified, naturally, to give a first hand account, is the man who was on the spot at the time. history, folklore was being made!

For instance, Mr. Harry Fisher, of 10015, 106th St, Edmonton, was on the spot when the big gold rush to the Klondike was going on at the end of last Century. Mr. Fisher was one of the lucky ones. He and three partners participated in the largest lay cleanup in the history of the Klondike.... taking out $52,000 worth of gold as a result of only twenty four hours work. Mr. Fisher and his companions were known thereafter as the "Four Lucky Laymen". Their fame has been sung by Robert Service and others.

Mr. Fisher was in the north a good while before he made his big strike, and his own account of one of his adventures makes reading that puts fiction to shame. " If there is one thing more than another," says Mr. Fisher, " that stirs the imagination of a prospector, it is the report of a new gold discovery. At first it will filter through in the most mysterious manner, and you will be convinced that you and the prospector are the only two that know anything about it.

Such a rumor was wafted to me in the spring of 1900 by a clerk in the gold commissioners office in Dawson. The location was given as the upper waters of the Stewart River on the south Fork. As near as could be ascertained this meant a trip of about four hundred miles, all up stream, into the heart of the Rockies.

I soon got in touch with two companions who were prepared to undertake this hazardous trip with me. These were Jack Patterson and Andrew Smith, both well and favorably known in the Yukon. The three of us got our outfits together as quietly as possible. Outfits consisted of five months supply of food, two canoes and summer clothes only, as we intended to get back before the first of Oct.

On the 28th of May the first steamer to leave Dawson was the Flora. She was bound up the Yukon to White Horse, and we decided to take passage on her as far as the mouth of the Stewar t, about ninety miles up the Yukon. On the morning of our departure, much to our surprise, we found that there were over one hundred passengers bound for the mouth of the Stewart, and we guessed right when we concluded that they were all on the same gold stampede as our selves.

About five minutes before the boat started, Mr. Senkler the Gold Commissioner, came down to the dock. He told me he had heard I was going on this stampede, and wanted to know if I would act as recorder for the new district. He then produced a bundle of books and papers and told me I'd find all the instructions inside. He said my salary would be eight dollars per day until I returned. I accepted, and we had no sooner started on our journey, than news spread around that I was recorder for the new district. I was besiged with inquiries about the new district and discovery. They naturally thought I knew all about it, and , of course, I let 'em think ~~that~~ I did. I soon pumped the information from one party who claimed he knew the exact location: it was " Canoe Creek" about forty miles up the South Fork of the Stewart.

In due time we reache d the mouth of the Steward River, and at this point the race into the interior really began. We all had an even start, and within two hours of our landing we were all bound for the new Eldorado.

About the first of July we arrived at Fraser Falls,, 210 miles up the Stewart.At this point a portage of about three-quarters of a mile had to be made. Another week brought us to the South fork of t the Stewart,, fifty miles above the falls.. I had given out word that I would establish a recording office at the mouth of the south fork,, so when we arrived I and my partners halted and made this our base. We were agreeably surprised to find a deserted cabin in very fair conditionx,, not far from our landing.. We put the best part of our supplies in this cabin,, and continued our rush up the river,, in the hope that some one of the hundred prospectors would locate the discovery.. After about two weeks of futile search,, I returned alone to our base and began making preparations for my office work as recorder..

About the middle of August,, two trappers arrived from Dawson with a years outfit. These men were Jim Mervyn and Billy Bowes,, both from Listowell,, Ontario,, or near there.. These two men had been up in this region the year before,, and it was presumably from their report of the district that the stampede resulted. They stopped at my cabin, which was,, indeed,, their own,, since they had built it the preceding year.. But they didn't intend using it the coming winter. I endeavored to get information from them about the gold discovery,, and of course they assured me there was nothing in it.. That it was all a myth.. This information only made me believe all the more that they knew aboutx it,, but would not go near the location until the big crowd of prospectors left for down-river in the early fall..

I then asked what the chances were of my getting some grub from them,, provided I wished to remain in the country all winter. They told me I could have all the supplies I needed,, and,, in fact,, told me they would be pleased to have me come and live with them.. I told them I would think the matter over and let them know later,, and to say nothing about it.. Mervyn and Bowes were both fine fellows,

and were so enthusiastic about their trapping possibilities, that the idea of staying up there became an obsession with me. I could think of nothing else, so I told them I had decided to stay, and would visit their place shortly after the crowd left.

I did not wait, however, until freeze-up. I went to their cabin early in September . . . about a ten-mile jaunt from where I was located. I stayed at their place and had my first lesson in killing and dressing a moose. I also got some valuable information about making dead-falls to catch marten and other fur-bearing animals.

About the first of October, after I had returned to my own place, the gold stampeders began to go back down the river. As they arrived at my place I took their names and addresses, and where they had prospected. They all had the same report to make . . . nothing was found and no indications of gold discovered.

The two friends that I came up the river with arrived about the 10th of October. The ice was then beginning to form, and they insisted that I pack up quickly and come back with them. I told them there were still a couple of parties up the river, and that I intended to wait until they came down, so I would have a complete record of everyone who had been up there. I promised to go down river as soon as the last prospector had reported. I suggested that they not wait for me and told them that in all probability I would overtake them at Fraser Falls.

Before leaving, I asked my friends to leave a sack of beans with me as well as a pair of blankets. They knew nothing about the two trappers being in the country and of course did not for a

moment suspect that I had made up my mind to stay. Needless to say, they were the last two to go down the river, for ~~in~~ less than two days after, the ice began to form and in a very short while, the river was completely frozen over.

I now set about making my cabin as comfortable as possible. I had a small kit of tools consisting of two axes -- one large and one small -- a saw, a hammer, a couple of files, a whetstone, and a couple of good sheath knives. I also had a first class rifle and plenty of ammunition.

My first kill was a black bear. He was in splendid condition so I got a very fine bear skin that came in for good use later on for my bed. I next got a full grown bull moose about two hundred yards from my cabin, but the skinning and butchering of this animal was no easy matter -- it took me two days to finish the job. But eventually I got him cut up and placed in my cache which had been added to my cabin.

I was now well provided for, so I started to build a trap line. I built the dead-falls about two hundred yards apart, or about eight to the mile. It took me a whole month to complete the task. The line ran five miles directly south, and five miles directly north from where I was located. Right from the start I began catching marten. This work was not only invigorating, but it was exciting, and I took great pleasure in it. Except for a few unusually cold days, I worked ten hours a day; covering one of the lines every day.

~~My next experience was making snow shoes. In this work, I can honestly say, I derived more satisfaction in mastering the intricacies~~

I had supplies enough to keep me going comfortably until about the middle of January, and consequently I had no occasion to visit the two trappers. The fact is, I was so busy attending to my trap line during the day, and making things for my own comfort during the long evenings, that I had no time to think of anything but my work, and the time passed very quickly.

About the middle of January I decided to go to call on Mervyn and Bowes and get some supplies from them. As daylight only lasts about four hours at this season of the year, I left about an hour before dawn so as to give myself plenty of time to get to their cabin before dark. I had to break trail all the way and the going was heavy. I arrived at their place about 2 o'clock and it was just beginning to get dark.

At this stage I received, what I consider the greatest jolt of my existence. The cabin was empty -- completely deserted, and to all appearances, no one had lived in it during the winter. The first shock to my feelings cannot be described. I faced what I considered a lingering death from starvation. I dared not think of returning to my cabin that night. In the first place I was very tired, and the route I had taken to come to the cabin was across country. If I attempted the return journey by night, I might easily lose my direction and get lost.

There was a big pile of cut firewood which had been left outside. It was ocvered with snow, but it didn't take long for me to get a good fire going in front of the cabin door. I shall never forget that terrible night of twenty hous. The constant thought of "how was I going to pull through the winter alone" kept running through my mind. Even now, after ~~thirty~~ forty years, I remember that

night as a terrible nightmare.

The following morning at daybreak, about 10 o'clock, I started for my home cabin. I had no sooner started than I began to think of the McKenzie River Indians. I had been told by the two trappers in the fall that these Indians came over the mountains from Good Hope and lived and trapped in this part of the country all winter. They had also informed me that these Indians lived on moose meatt and tea exclusively. If this were true, why couldn't I do the same? The thought buoyed me up and lent great relief to my feelings.

I arrived home about 2 o'clock in the afternoon pretty tired, and very hungry, having been gone thirty hours without anything to eat. I always made it a point to keep a pot of stewed meat ready for use, and it took me no time to prepare myself a meal of this meat and beef broth which was heartily enjoyed. I continued my work on the trap line and soon became as enthusiastic as ever. I forgot all about the trouble of running short of food, as I had all the meat I desired and could get more any time I required it.

About the middle of February, two Indians came to my cabin. They belonged to the Good Hope band I have already mentioned. These men were a very fine and healthy type of Indian and I was very pleased to see them. I had a large map of the district and got them to point out where they were located and the route they had taken in getting to my place. It was about forty miles back in the mountains. I got a few marten skins from them for which I paid in bills. They knew nothing about the denomination of the bills, but took my word for their value. A few weeks later, I arrived home from my trap line and found a whole band of Indians and their dog teams awaiting me.

There was an old man in their party who for some unaccountable reason would not come inside my cabin. I tried to find out the reason for this, and one of the younger Indians who could speak a little English, pointed to my bald head. I jokingly picked up a pair of scissors and said, "I'll fix him!" Immediately they all became surly and I thought it best not to joke nor say any more about the old chief. I got about fifteen marten skins from them for which I paid thirty dollars.

One Indian had two skins for which I have him five dollars -- this was one dollar too much -- I had no smaller bills, so I told him, "Come again, bring one skin." "Good," he answered, "Good." And I let it go at that, and they all departed happy as lords. Ten days later, very much to my surprise, this Indian came all the way from his camp to my cabin to pay me back the marten skin he owed me. He stayed at my place all night and I gave him a feed of beef stew which he pronounced "good." He had several slabs of dried meat on his toboggan (about twenty pounds), which he wanted to sell me. Of course, I would not buy it as I had all the fresh meat I needed. He left early the following morning and, strange to say, he left this dried meat in my cache. At first I was going to throw it out, but thinking he might come back for it, I piled it away on a back shelf.

About the first of April, the weather began to get warn, and the days lengthened out very rapidly. Trapping seemed to be over, for I had gone over my line several days without getting anything. So about the 10th of April, I decided to knock down all my dead-falls and quit. Around the 15th, my meat began to thaw, and I had to cut

off parts of it and throw it away.

I now took my rifle and started out to kill a moose. I hunted in all directions for several days in the most favorable locations where they had been plentiful all winter. But all to no avail. There was not an animal of any description to be found except wolves, and they were howling from all directions. The moose had all departed to the southern slope of the mountains fifty or a hundred miles away.

Things began to look serious. I still had a good supply of meat, but it was very difficult to keep. I dug an opening ten feet in under the shore ice, and put my meat in there. It appeared as cold as any refrigerator, but the hot air penetrated, and it still kept thawing slightly. About the 10th of May, my meat was positively unfit for food, and still the ice was solid on the river and gave very few indications of a break-up. I then turned to the Indians dried meat that had been put away in my cache. I found it good and fresh, and it satisfied my appetite thoroughly for the next fifteen days until the ice went out of the river.

I have the greatest regard and friendly feeling towards the Good Hope Indians for I honestly believe that the old chief who had visited my cabin, knew exactly what would happen in the spring, and had sent me this dried meat to carry me along until the ice went out.

I waited a couple of days after the break-up for I did not wish to follow the ice too closely for fear of being caught in a jam since there was still a lot of ice coming down the river.. On the morning of the 28th, I packed my belongings into the canoe and was just

getting ready to make a start when I saw a boat with two min in it coming down the river. They were my old friends the trappers. They were very much surprised to see me and told me that as I had not called on them in the early part of the winter, they had thought I had gone down the river with the stampeders. It appears trapping was not very good in the location which they had chosen, and in consequence, they had moved farther into the interior about fifty miles. After getting a good meal of white man's food under my belt, I bid goodbye to the little cabin at the south fork of the Stewart River and started for Dawson.

At this season of the year, the sun shines for about twenty hours out of the twenty-four, and as we had nothing to do but drift with the current, we could keep going for long hours. The only obstacle on our road down was a portage at Fraser Falls. On the third day as we neared the mouth of the Stewart, I noticed a man on the bank of the river who hailed me to come ashore which I did. He caught the bow of my canoe and after pulling it well up on shore asked the question, "Is your name Fisher?" I told him it was, and he said "Come in here."

It must be understood I was a pretty dilapidated looking individual -- I had a year's growth of wild and woolly whiskers and a suit that was cut, patched, and quilted in a manner that would be envied by the comedian in any comic opera. He brought me to his cabin where he had a companion. They were two NorthWest Mounties and from them I learned the following:

When my two partners came down in the fall they'd reported that I must have been caught in the ice up at Fraser Falls, and

when they got to Dawson they reported the same conditions to the authorities. Orders had therefore been given to these two mounties to go after me.

About the Ist of December these two policemen made a trip up over the ice to the Falls and back...a distance of four hundred and 20 miles with dog team, and finding no indication of life in that locality, they had reported that I must be dead. This news was forwarded to my relatives in Montreal, who applied to two life Insurance Companies for payment of polices I carried. The Companies, however, refused to pay until further proof of my death was forthcoming.

The Policemen fixed me up as presentable as possible, and one of them came with me the remaining ninety miles to Dawson. I had been away exactly one year, but in my dairy I had gained three days in my reckoning.

After selling my fur and settling with the Government for one year's salary, I had over forty-three hundred dollars for my year's experience. I have always contended, and still maintain, that I never put in a healthier winter in my life!

And this conclusion of Mr. Fisher's tale seems to wind up another chapter of "Alberta Stories." Sometime I want to tell the tale of Mr. Fisher's "Big Strike" in the Klondike. Goodbye, for now, and if you have a story to tell, drop me a line. Address ~~Stark~~Alberta Stories, Station CKUA, Edmonton.